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ABSTRACT

Three problems concerning the use of history texts in secondary schools can be underscored. The first is philosophical, the intended use of the history text. The philosophical underpinnings of history texts are a matter of some contention today. History and social studies texts were, for many years, viewed as a means of socializing new citizens and forging a national identity. The extent to which today's teachers see this as appropriate is unclear. The second issue is definitional, the assumed purpose of a text. The extent to which history texts are able to provide an objective, complete view of a past period is subject to question. The proper role of a history text is to provide students with the possibility of finding out for themselves about the past, and also to discover for themselves who they are in the process. The third area examined concerns issues of texts and nationalism. Canadian teachers face many dilemmas in teaching U.S. history or in using U.S. textbooks. Both U.S. and Canadian peoples need to ask themselves questions concerning the role they wish history to play in the teaching of their young people. (DB)

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(TRADITIONAL AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTS): THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES

A PAPER TO BE READ AT THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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The subject of the nature or composition of a text in whatever field, is one of extreme controversy. The subject of the nature of history texts is no less fraught with problems; some of them philosophical, some of them political and some of them even educational. This paper will examine a few of these problems in the hope of adding to the growing debate about the viability and substance of history texts.

There are three main areas of textual import that will be addressed in this paper. The first of these is philosophical - the intended use of the history text. To do this, the writer will briefly look at the 'mandate' of many history texts at the secondary level, where the aim is to teach students to be responsible citizens. The author will ask if the mandate of John Dewey and other pioneers of the social studies can still be effectively carried out through texts, and whether we should be using texts for this purpose. The second area that this paper will address is definitional - the assumed purpose of a text, be it in history or in any of the social sciences. The author asks if texts purport to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The question of how texts do this and how they are interpreted is also examined, and some concluding suggestions about the possibility of the viability of texts as the cannons of knowledge are made. The third, and last, area of interest that this paper will address is a nationalistic one; one that has affected the author's own career teaching history and social studies at the secondary and university level: namely, whose story are we listening to? There are several components to this. First, is the text's message one that reflects a particular national interest? Do Canadians, for example, learn about history through U.S. lenses indirectly or directly, and if so, whose responsibility is that? Second, whose voice is being heard in a text? Are

the voices of women and children from the past and from other cultures being represented in a meaningful way? Are texts speaking for and to their intended audience of teachers, students, parents and society in general?

The philosophical bases, or the epistemological underpinnings, of history texts are varied. However, there are some general things that can be said that may serve to clarify the question of the intention of the text. To look at this issue in depth, one would have to write an extensive paper on the historiography of texts, and this can certainly not be done in the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, one can look at texts like The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire. In this book, Gibbon was demonstrating that history had a didactic nature. History was tied to the idea of progress and this progress was implicit in the ethos of the Western European mind. John Dewey, one of the founding fathers of twentieth century educational theory, regarded the importance of social studies in a way that Gibbon would not have found objectionable. For Dewey, the purpose of social studies was to socialize the waves of new immigrants to America and to produce, through the teaching of social studies and history, responsible citizens. The stated purpose of social studies and history at many secondary schools today is still the same. That being the case, the question must be asked if the text is an extension of the same ethic that Gibbon eschewed. If the purpose of American History is to justify the American way of life then the American history textbook can logically be seen as an extension of this purpose. I think that most history teachers would reject this. The question though, is, do the majority of history texts teach this implicitly?

Do history texts tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth? I think that the answer to this is no to both questions. History texts at

the secondary level are at best highly selective surveys. This is generally due to cost factors. However, wide ranging and varied audiences in geographically and ethnically diverse areas are also factors to be considered. Because of this mandate, it is niave to assume that the whole truth could be presented in this format. As an historiographer, I am familiar with the debate about the nature and composition of 'facts', 'explanations' and 'meanings' in history. Any debate in this room or at this conference would, I am sure, produce a variety of decisions about the very essence of the nature of historical knowledge. It should not be surprising that those who write about the past for secondary school audiences have trouble, not only with the mandate of the publishing industry and the various interest groups that must be listened to, but also to the nature of the subject about which they are writing.

In summary, any confusion about the nature of the philosophical basis of history and social studies texts is well founded. The confusion stems in part from the historical mandate to tie the teaching of social studies and the historical past to the forging of a national identity. The confusion also stems from uncertainty on the part of the historians themselves regarding the nature of the subject, the form and substance of their sources and the nature of the claims that entail from their narratives, stories or analyses. These confusions, though, can be placed into a meaningful context if they are seen as an ongoing attempt to discover what we have been, and why we are doing what we are doing in the present. In other words, if history is a process then the terms 'beginning', 'ending', 'causes', 'effects' and 'results', take on different meanings than they do if history is a static re-telling of a recoverable past. Seen in this light, an ongoing discussion about the nature of

history becomes an ongoing discussion about our own natures. It may well be that the teachers and practitioners of the craft of history have attempted too much rather than too little. In an effort to please all the audiences, they may have created a form of knowledge that has little or no resemblance to the craft they hold dear to their intellectual and physical hearts. In the process, they may also be giving a faulty interpretation of what history and thinking is all about. Therefore, the role of any history text is more than an explanation of the past; it is also a description of the way in which we have thought about, and acted upon, particular ideas and events.

The second issue is definitional, and follows directly from the first. If a text is assumed to be giving the best overall picture of the past, then the text has failed us. The assumption on behalf of school boards is that any text can tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth is niave. If teachers believe that any text is a guarantee of a fool proof curriculum, they are short changing themselves and the students they teach.

History as knowledge of the past in its actuality and completeness is an illusion. Historians, writers, editors, teachers and students are bound by the questions they ask about the past. Therefore, knowledge about the past is best represented by the equation of questions and answers. Questions are relative to the evidence and evidence is relative to the question. The kind of question that a student asks, for example, "Why did the Civil War occur?", sets the framework for the evidence that will be used to build an explanation. Evidence is chosen on the basis of the questions that are asked about the past. What we need to be studying is the nature of these questions, and how it is that they come to be important for our historical past. The study of history and the creation of history

text books, therefore, is one in which the writer is called upon to wear at least two hats at the same time. She/he is required to be a philosopher, to make sure that the thought is rational and valid. She/he must also be an historian in the sense of looking at the ideas of people in the past. The trick as R.G. Collingwood knew was to wear both hats at the same time: that is to study the rational thoughts of the past by reenacting them in one's own mind. My suggestion about the purpose of a history text is that it provide the students with the possibility of beginning to find out for themselves about the past, and also to discover for themselves who they are in the process. As I have suggested, any self-knowledge should be grounded in asking personal and specific questions about the past. Textbook writers could accomplish much more if they accepted this mandate. The possibility presents itself for framing specific sets of 'why' questions which could be applied to primary source materials. In this way, the student would become an historical detective, hunting through the evidence in search of acceptable explanations. Each activity would attempt to establish the rules for evidence and rational thinking. In the process, not only would students learn how to think about the past, they would also learn that historical thinking can be applied to the present. As a consequence of this type of activity, specific content would also be learnt, so that theory and practice would be wedded in a meaningful manner. If any text can do this, it is, I believe, a success.

The problem of telling the whole truth and nothing but the whole truth, therefore, becomes an exercise in good history writing. The possibility of having, on this account, a multiplicity of answers, or total relativism, is slight if the teacher is knowledgeable about the subject. If the teacher isn't knowledgeable, then this becomes a political issue

about the quality of teacher education and preparation. If the teacher is reasonably well prepared, then the same rules of decision making and rational thinking that apply to the craft of history should also apply to the teaching experience in the school classroom. The terrible reality of the situation is, that in too many classrooms today, the harried existence of modern life and the innumerable pressures of teaching have left many teachers with the perceived need for a text that will do the impossible. The solution to the problem of how to use texts properly, and to a substantive approach to the teaching of history is multifaceted. In part, it calls for teachers to be relieved of the burden of having to be the jacks and jills of all trades, when the rest of society doesn't have the answers either. In part, it is a call for teacher training institutions not to back off their demand for rigorous scholarship for novice teachers so they can teach the past, and launch their students on the voyage of self-discovery. In part, it is also a command to the publishing industry to take seriously the craft of history. It is a call to study what history is all about. It may also be a call for regional texts. Perhaps it is time to produce specific texts for specific needs. Perhaps a recognized acceptable core can be kept, but how can we assume that student and teacher needs are the same in every school district served by any one text? One solution to this problem lies in teacher education. Teachers might be encouraged, through the development of localized or regional curriculum, to rely less heavily on the prescriptive focus of the traditional texts.

The last issue I want to address in this paper is a nationalistic factor, and to use this as a focus for the points that I have already made in this paper. As a former high school history teacher in the province of Ontario in Canada, and a faculty member teaching both history and teacher

education in Alberta, I have become familiar with the constituent audiences in the debate about texts. In the province of Ontario it was the case, and probably still is the case today, that any first line text used in the classrooms of that province must be written and published in Canada, unless there is no other source available. In cases such as these, the individual boards of education, in conjunction with the provincial government, grant provisional permission to use an alternate source. In the last few years, a major revision of the curriculum has been undertaken, and in many cases, there were not available sufficient Canadian texts to serve the market. Many of us turned to American written and produced texts for our purposes. Not only are American texts often cheaper to buy, but also, they are often more comprehensive than Canadian texts. So for example, a text like World History, Patterns of Civilization, by Burton F. Beers or The Human Experience, A World History, by Farah, Karls and Kortepeter can satisfy the needs of courses in American, Ancient and Contemporary History. (There are other references for this which are listed at the end of this article.) The temptation to use such a book is overwhelming for many administrators and for many teachers too. The cost is obviously less than buying a specific text for each course and the lay-out and supporting materials is overwhelming in comparison to a text produced in Canada of the Canadian market. Therefore, in many instances, schools will purchase an American text authorized for secondary use and use it as a primary course. The results of this type of use are profound. First, students have a propensity to believe that texts are an eternal source of truth claims about the past. A text, no matter what its place of origin, comes to represent a statement of what the world is all about. In The Human Experience Canada is referred to in nine pages. In World History, the

topic Canada gets a mere twelve page coverage out of eight hundred. What are students to read into this?

In the Civil War Canada, and Canadians played a greater role than being just the last stop on the Underground Railway. Few, if any, American high school texts look at Canada's role vis a vis Britain's military plans for possible intervention in the Civil War. Few, if any, address the fact that there had been slavery in Canada. Fewer still question the effect the civil war had on the development of Canada's consciousness, and the development of mistrust and cynicism of her neighbour to the south. Is the real meaning of American history that only America has had an influence on the history of the world? Could it possibly be that all events in the past are to be fitted into a dialectical pattern which culminates in the American style of democracy? Unlikely, but the table of contents of most texts that I have seen would indicate this to a Canadian student.

This is, I suppose, the point. The use and composition of American history textbooks teaches a cynicism and arrogance that doesn't represent the best of what is American. What it does do is often display a jingoistic arrogance that breeds cynicism and skepticism in its neighbours. In many Canadian schools, American texts are taken to represent what Americans are like. Therefore, when World History asks students in chapter six to compare education in Athens to education in the United States today, there can be several reactions. The first reaction is that a Canadian teacher could ignore the question. Unlikely. The second reaction is that the question could be put in a Canadian context. Also unlikely, but less so. The third possibility is that the question becomes a critique of U.S. education seen through the eyes of Canadians. Well you might cry foul here. One might also claim that there is no protection against any misuse

of a text, if that is what is intended. In think both these replies are niave.

Firstly, most American history texts openly court the Canadian market. That market is not as large as the American one, but it is every bit as lucrative. It is niave to assume, then, that those who publish these texts are not aware that their books are read and studied outside of their country and that the questions which they pose in representing American culture, and the evidence which they select becomes, de facto, an interpretation or an explanation of the way things are, and how they have come to be this way. Secondly, in Canada, the history of American cultural imperialism is well documented. In our times, this cultural imperialism is as seductive as it has ever been. Most Canadians, as I am sure you are aware, watch American T.V., read American novels, listen to American music and generally are drawn to the frantic, creative tempo of modern American life.

While feeling a pull toward the dynamic culture to our south, we are still trying to define who it is we are. No simple definition of nationalism will suffice here; no text book can do that job. In Canada, two founding cultures agreed to form a nation, perhaps to stop themselves from becoming American. The twentieth century, which brought world stature and definition to what it has meant to be an American, has brought confusion and cynicism to most Canadians. Our recent debates about Free Trade and Meech Lake are testimony to that. It is difficult for us to answer questions such as, "Do we want to be rich at the price of losing our national identity?", "Do we have a national identity?", or "Are we a series of regions that exist as a unit simply for defensive and economic purposes?" For Canadians, these kinds of questions are important. The use

in one way or another of texts of the type I have described from outside our boundaries doesn't help the problem. But is there a solution? I would certainly not want to ban any text which wasn't Canadian. To do this would be to create a more insular and shallow culture. As a result of the free trade agreement, it seems likely that there will be an increasing American influence on Canadian education and culture, regardless, because of the economic factors involved. Therefore, the answer must and does lie elsewhere. A solution for Canadians might be to redefine the nature of the history text. That is, texts could be written which are not prescriptive but which teach students to come to know themselves, and to teach that history is a process analogous to human experience. Texts which deal with the Americanisation of the world may be valuable, but they should be cast in a subject area other than what I have characterized as History (perhaps sociology would do).

Teaching American History also troubles many of us. It is not that you don't have a history. The question is which one shall we teach? Whose version of the War of 1812 do we teach? Whose version of the Vietnam War do we teach?, and so on. There are innumerable instances of issues where there simply does not seem to be one correct version. That is not a problem until one turns on the TV or finds a book that provides a 'true' answer to these situations. This complication is a chance to broaden 'history' in the way that I have described it, yet many Canadian, and most likely American, teachers are too restricted by time, exams and other matters to deal with any topic in the depth required. In Canada, the case is even more complex. I would suggest a majority of history teachers are cultural nationalists, and to some degree anti-American. Many feel it is their duty to try to define and structure a Canadian identity in their

students. The adaptation of American texts acerbates this problem. Teachers in my country need broader visions. What they also need is a neighbour cognizant of its presence, and sympathetic to its needs. We are, after all, very much like the mouse sleeping next to the elephant. When you roll over, we get squashed. Texts, through a more sensitive approach to issues and through a redefining of their role can go along way towards alleviating this problem.

Canadian students are well aware that these issues are not as clear cut as they appear in many texts, and the result is often not a more sophisticated audience, but a more cynical one. The effect of the complexity of life coupled with its horrors, joys and prospects often seems too overwhelming in the face of the slick advertising and gloss that can be substituted in its place. Isn't it easier to live the lie than to face up to the challenge that seems insurmountable? I think that both your experiences and ours in social problems show that this is the case.

The solution, I believe, is not difficult to achieve. First, the idea of what a text represents needs to be re-thought. Texts should be represented as part of the curriculum, not as a teacher proof substitution. Both our countries need to think very seriously about what 'history' is suppose to be teaching our young. Do we want to establish a national culture? Do we want to create a melting pot? Do we, perhaps, want students to be responsible thinkers who know why they are making the choices they are? If we opt for the latter then we are on the wrong road. At the present time, the teaching of history seems to have another agenda that has to do with memorizing facts and providing measurable outcomes. It also has something to do with the status quo and the voices of white middle class males.

One suggestion, would be to listen to the voices of the children we teach and incorporate them into the texts and curriculum. Another, would be to listen to the voices of teachers, parents, minority groups and those outside our borders, in this case Canadians, although the case could be made for other countries as well. In this way, the teaching of history would really become an exercise in self-knowledge. It would also become the study and retention of the factual basis of the basic values of society. Most importantly, texts could become the vehicle for these aims instead of obstacles to them. Reliance on primary sources, and more attention to student and teacher concerns are needed if texts are to act as the agents of change. If these suggestions were implemented, the teaching of American History would not be just the pageant of the past, but a spring-board for a debate on the process, whereby, we have come to be who we are and what the choices of action are for us.

The mandate of history is to discover how actions in the past can contribute to solutions in the present. This suggestion is important in light of the rapidly changing world in which we live. If historical knowledge can provide insight into the present then the study of history and the purpose of texts seem clear, for by describing the decisions of the past which have lead to blind alleys, we can prevent their reoccurrence. We can also indicate that there are other choices left which can lead to the possibility of new and creative choices.

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